

Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph by T.E. Lawrence

Summary review compiled by Mike Blackledge of The Last Thursday Book Club in Albuquerque June 2005.

T. E. Lawrence [1888-1935] is known to the public as Lawrence of Arabia. But how does history define him – as a gifted writer or a man of action? He would prefer the former description although both are accurate. He tells his story beautifully in “*Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*,” but many readers cannot believe that someone could capture “truth” in such detail, right down to the flora and fauna, with a detailed description of the geology of the desert. The question of veracity in the telling is reminiscent of Malachy McCourt complaining that he did not remember being nearly as poor as described in *Angela's Ashes*. The author (brother Frank) responded, “It's a memoir, not a history.” So it is with *Seven Pillars* as Lawrence reminds us many times. Read it as pure fiction if you must, but read it. This is a fascinating book that includes some lavishly elegant writing, infused with humorous and clever anecdotes from a brilliant linguist and an amazingly driven individual.

I first read *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as a young man, some 40 years ago – probably about 1962 when David Lean’s magnificent “*Lawrence of Arabia*” movie was released, based on the book. I had long since forgotten the specific content of the book but never the impact it had upon me. With the British (and Americans) back in the Middle East, it seemed to be an appropriate time to request that our Book Club read the book – as it turned out, only one in four of us had previously read it, although everyone was familiar with the movie.

One unofficial rule for our Book Club is no selection more than about 300 pages in length, 400 at most, and *Seven Pillars* is 660 pages long. I first considered having us read "*Revolt in the Desert*," which is the abridged version (created to help pay Lawrence’s bills for the lavish first edition of *Seven Pillars* he commissioned.). But, in comparing the two, I found the introductory material in *Seven Pillars* concerning Arabia, the Arabs, and the Semitic people to be too interesting to dismiss. I compromised by announcing we would limit our discussion through Chapter LVII which takes us to the capture of Akaba: 327 pages of the 660. Even if one read only these pages of *Seven Pillars*, I felt one would be richer than to read the entire 435 pages of *Revolt*.

“El Orens,” the man himself, was the 2nd illegitimate son of Thomas Chapman, a landed Englishman in Ireland and the 2nd son of Sarah Lawrence who was originally hired as governess to Thomas’ four daughters. Thomas left his wife to live with Sarah. They moved to Wales and had four sons. As a young man, Lawrence spent a lengthy walking tour in Syria and Jordan and, later in his archeology work, learned to work with the Arabs without using the British military. In stature, he looked nothing like Peter O’Toole; Lawrence was short and had a large head.

The *Amazon.com* editorial review provides a glowing if arguably naïve summation of the work:

“This is the exciting and highly literate story of the real Lawrence of Arabia, as written by Lawrence himself, who helped unify Arab factions against the occupying Turkish army, circa World War I. Lawrence has a novelist’s eye for detail, a poet’s command of the language, an adventurer’s heart, a soldier’s great story, and his memory and intellect are at least as good as all those. Lawrence describes the famous guerrilla raids, and train bombings you know from the movie, but also tells of the Arab people and politics with great penetration. Moreover, he is witty, always aware of the ethical tightrope that the English walked in the Middle East and always willing to include himself in his own withering insight.”

Now for the controversy, and there is plenty of it. Biographies of Lawrence claim that some of the events in *Seven Pillars* either did not take place or were embellished well beyond any semblance of truth. An answer to these claims is Lawrence himself: he stated several times that this was not a history and was not intended to be a history. When confronted about his writing of the Arabs' taking Damascus, he smiled and said, "Yes, I was on pretty shaky ground in that part of the book."

Some will say Lowell Thomas "invented" the myth of Lawrence of Arabia, and Thomas' book "With Lawrence of Arabia," 1925, clearly speaks to the subject of the debunkers of that myth. Most current historians support the basic text of "*Seven Pillars*." David Fromkin [see Ref 1 and 2] is quoted as being on one side of this argument. I would suggest one might read Lawrence's words in the book "*T. E. Lawrence to his biographers Robert Graves and Liddell Hart*" and form your own opinion. This book was first published as two separate works in 1938, then combined in 1963 by Graves and Hart [Ref 9].

The book certainly appears to have relevance today. It should be noted that the March 1, 2004 *London Times* provided two different articles addressing this point of the relevance of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* on the subject of Arab guerrillas and insurgents in today's Iraq.

The book polarized our Book Club; some loved it and some were annoyed, which made for animated discussion. Here are some of the reactions, including the members' awarded "grades" for the book as captured from our discussion:

Ron: I was annoyed right from the beginning. The author signs his preface as "T.E. Shaw" - who? He gave a list of all the chapters, which is good, but the man kept "*Seven Pillars*" as the title because he once wrote another book called "*Seven Pillars*" and liked the title? Are you kidding? I had the feeling that Lawrence was bi-polar, or on too much caffeine. He writes what he wants. It is a significant book, but it is not history so much as how events are strung together. Interesting but was I learning anything or wasting my time? As a read (not a history) I give it a **B**.

Ken: I had very mixed emotions - I found the first 50 pages or so very tedious and only kept reading because of my Book Club responsibilities. A good decision since the book began to become more interesting. It was hard to keep track of the characters and places since the new and mostly strange names kept pouring out page after page. The continuing detailed descriptions on the flora, fauna and landscape traversed in Lawrence's journeys became so boring that I started to skip over many such paragraphs after the first 100 pages. These omissions made the pages go by quicker and focused my attention on the more interesting story line and anecdotes (e.g., the excellent "Feasting", Chapter XLVI). Lawrence's writing style is both elegant and sometimes difficult to understand perhaps due to differences between "British English" and "American English" or perhaps due to my failure to master either. Grade: **B**

Ben: I liked it better as I got into it - very British. Ken, you had trouble with all the people, but I had trouble with all the Wadis [Arabic for dry riverbeds, used for geographic locale identification]. The writing was very good; the descriptions of sickness were well done. **A-**

Tom: I finished the entire book but did a disservice to myself by pushing through the last half. I did find some of the sentence construction difficult, but going back over it I found it elegant. Going back through it, I found interesting discussions of people. The battles worked to advance the story line. The guy is brilliant; the writing is beautiful. The book could really improve from an editor's touch; today an editor would cut out one third. **B**

Rob: This book, which provided insight into the British and Semite religious cultures, captivated me. I floated over some of it. Lowell Thomas helped to publicize Lawrence. I checked out and watched the '62 movie last week, and I liked the book more - O'Toole gave Lawrence a dazed, confused look in the movie - the 'real' Lawrence was much more interesting. One example: the way he described the beating in Naraa. **A**

Having selected the book, I was surprised that the writing did not captivate all others as much as I. Perhaps this book is one of those that require a second reading. This was certainly the case for Thomas E. Ricks writing in the *Washington Post* of last November: "It was being ambushed at midnight on the west bank of the Euphrates River in April that finally made me sit down and read through the memoirs of Lawrence of Arabia. Over the years I'd tried several times to read T.E. Lawrence's "*Seven Pillars of Wisdom*," a great memoir of World War I in the Middle East. Each time I faltered and put the book down, put off by Lawrence's obscure vocabulary, baroque style and equally twisted personality." But this time Ricks found it fascinating and highly relevant to today's Middle East involvement.

In Lawrence's carefully crafted words, we can learn about many aspects of Arabic life:

On Politics and the Leadership of Feisal:

Page 98: "So mixed was the company, Sherifs, Meccans, Sheihks, ..., Mesopotamians, Ageyl, that I threw apples of discord, inflammatory subjects of talk among them, to sound their mettle and beliefs without delay. Feisal, smoking innumerable cigarettes, kept command of the conversation even at its hottest, and it was fine to watch him do it. ... Feisal seemed to govern his men unconsciously: hardly to know how he stamped his mind on them, hardly to care whether they obeyed."

Pages 122-3: "Feisal, in speaking, had a rich musical voice, and used it carefully upon his men. To them he talked in tribal dialect, but with a curious, hesitant manner, as though faltering painfully among phrases, looking inwardly for just the right word. ... the phrases at last chosen were usually the simplest, which gave an effect emotional and sincere. It seemed possible, so thin was the screen of words, to see the pure and the very brave spirit shining out."

Reasons for the Revolt

Page 100: "The tribes had followed the smoke of their radical fanaticism. ... The Semites idea of nationality was the independence of clans and villages, and their ideal of national union was episodic combined resistance to an intruder. They were fighting to get rid of Empire, not to win it."

Aims of the Revolt

Page 101: "Of religious fanaticism there was little trace. ... 'Christians fight Christians, so why should not Mohammedans do the same? What we want is a Government which speaks our own language of Arabic and will let us live in peace. Also we hate those Turks.' "

Assets of the Arabs

Pages 102-3: "The men received me cheerfully. Beneath every great rock or bush they sprawled like lazy scorpions, resting from the heat, and refreshing their brown limbs with the early coolness of the shaded stone. They were physically thin, but exquisitely made, moving with an oiled activity altogether delightful to watch. ... They would ride immense distances day after day, run through sand and over rocks bare-foot in the heat for hours without pain, and climb their hills like goats. ... They were corrugated with bandoleers, and fired joy-shots when they could."

More, page 103: "They were in wild spirits, shouting that the war might last ten years. It was the fattest time the hills had ever known. ... The Turks were offering great bribes, and obtaining little service --no active service. The Arabs took their money, and gave gratifying assurances in exchange; yet these very tribes would be meanwhile in touch with Feisal, who obtained service for his payment. The Turks cut the throats of their prisoners with knives, as though they were butchering sheep."

Fear of artillery by the Arabs:

Page 105: "They thought of weapons as destructive in proportion to their noise. They were not afraid of bullets, not indeed overmuch of dying: just the manner of death by shell-fire was unendurable."

TEL wore native head-cloth vice a Western hat:

Page 109: "Our persistence in the hat (due to a misunderstanding of the ways of heat-stroke) had led the East to see significance in it, and after long thought their wisest brains concluded that Christians wore the hideous thing that its broad brim might interpose between their weak eyes and the uncongenial sight of God. So it reminded Islam continually that God was miscalled and disliked by Christians."

Lawrence's second book, "*The Mint*," was also about his government service, but written after he had sought anonymity through service in the British Army air corps. It never really attracted a following or generated the interest of *Seven Pillars*. When Lawrence died from a motorcycle accident in 1935, his life story ended too soon and dramatically as well.

I submit that *Seven Pillars* is an important book, a superbly written book, a book to be read by everyone who appreciates excellent descriptive writing. Remember, at times love can be annoying. David Fromkin, Professor of History at Boston University who has written several books about the First World War and the Middle East, has perhaps the appropriate last word on the enigmatic, controversial Lawrence:

"As a citizen of the twentieth century, Lawrence valued history little and entertainment a great deal. Fiction is stranger than truth, and T. E. found it more fun: due to him, there are those who believe that Damascus was liberated in 1918 by a band of Arabs led by someone who looked like Peter O'Toole. It is as a voice of our time that he is certain to be heard. As other men lust for power or wealth or women, he craved to be noticed and to be remembered—and he was and he is, and he will be."

References:

1. David Fromkin's excellently written on-line view of T.E. Lawrence and his life:
<http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/10/sept91/fromkin.htm>
2. David Fromkin's book: "A Peace to End All Peace: Creating the Modern Middle East 1914-1922"
3. Lawrence of Arabia homepage: <http://www.telawrence.info/index.htm> - This homepage links the content of two web sites: The Lawrence of Arabia Factfile and T. E. Lawrence Studies. The Factfile contains general biographical information about the life and career of Thomas Edward Lawrence, 1888-1935. The T.E. Lawrence Studies site contains more detailed biographical and bibliographical information, as well as a reference gallery of photographs.
4. "Lessons of Arabia" by Thomas E. Ricks, the Washington Post, Friday, November 26, 2004; Page A39:
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A13515-2004Nov25?language=printer>
5. The Lawrence of Arabia Factfile (see Ref 3. above): <http://www.telawrence.info/life/biog.htm>
6. On-line photos of Lawrence's Arabia from a "pilgrimage" to many T.E. Lawrence sites, based in a hotel near Petra: <http://www.aboh44.ukgateway.net/gallery/jordan.html>
7. Another link to the Jeremy Wilson compilation (Ref 3 above): <http://www.lawrenceofarabia.info/>

8. Last Thursday Book Club review: http://www.mike.blackledge.com/Summary_Reviews03.htm#CurReview
9. "T. E. Lawrence to his biographers Robert Graves and Liddell Hart," Doubleday, 1963.
10. A personal website with pictures of Lawrence's Arabia: <http://www.aboh44.ukgateway.net/gallery/jordan.html>

Additional debunking – web reference

The specific link for all "rejected Legends" is:

<http://www.telawrence.info/life/reject.htm>

and under 1917, click on Deraa.

The text regarding James' accusation (viz., the rape was fabricated) is rather long, but the summary includes the following (section below quoted from the site):

An enormous number of operational records from the First World War survive, and it is always rash to base startling conclusions on a single document. A less eccentric interpretation of the diary shows that, despite its initial date error, it is consistent with surviving contemporary records. Far from proving that Lawrence gave a false account of his movements during November 1917, it adds detail to what is known from other sources.

It also draws attention to something else, which James might have spotted if he had been less intent on proving Lawrence's dishonesty. Years later, Lawrence would write that it was in 1917 that he had decided, nebulously, to join the ranks, and that the 'friendly outings with the armoured car and air force fellows were what persuaded me that my best future, if I survived the war, was to enlist'. Might it not be significant that his first contact with British forces after the Deraa episode was an expedition with the armoured car and RFA units from Akaba?

Later comments:

The second page of the RFA War Diary is reproduced in facsimile in J. N. Lockman, *Scattered Tracks on the Lawrence Trail* (Whitmore Lake, Falcon Books, 1996, p. 59).

Anyone still tempted to believe James's version should note that Michael Asher, a more recent and equally 'controversial' biographer, whose *Lawrence, The Uncrowned King of Arabia* (London, Viking, 1998) adopts many of James's theories, chose to ignore James's alleged RFA Diary 'evidence'.
